DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 452 261 TM 032 548

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TITLE	Building Student Abilities for Test Taking.
PUB DATE	2001-00-00
NOTE	9p.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Ability; Academic Achievement; Elementary Secondary Education; *Standardized Tests; *State Standards; *Test Coaching; Test Use

ABSTRACT

Building student abilities for taking standardized tests has certainly become an issue as testing has become increasingly important in the U.S. educational system. How much emphasis should a school or district place on educating students to do well on such tests? It is certainly possible to spend too much school time learning to take tests, and the time for test preparation can certainly detract from other activities and experiences in the school curriculum. It is also possible to spend a great deal of money on test preparation materials that may prepare a student for a test that is not really relevant to the curriculum or to what he or she should be learning. States should make certain that they are using a good product as part of a state assessment program, and then they should ensure that schools are adhering to the state standards or objectives of instruction in teaching and learning. States have an obligation to make pilot studies of the tests they develop, just as they need to evaluate the chances of computer glitches in test scoring. The test results from students should be used to improve instruction and to improve the state standards. (SLD)

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Building Student Abilities for Test Taking

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BUILDING STUDENT ABILITIES FOR TEST TAKING

Building student abilities for taking state mandated tests has certainly become an issue. Writings in educational journals and talks presented at state teacher education conventions has pinpointed the importance of students doing well on thee tests. With issued report cards comparing school districts with each other in the media, school officials and teachers have become cognizant of the importance of students doing well on tests. Punishments for a lack of student achievement based on test results have been the following:

1. threats of implementing the voucher system.
2. threats of implementing educational bankruptcy laws.
3. threats of implementing merit pay for teachers.
4. threats of implementing or having exit exams for different grade levels and/or for high school graduation.
5. threats for not eliminating achievement gaps between diverse racial and socioeconomic levels of learners.

With threats of punishment for teachers and for schools/school systems, it appears that the state is using negative ways to encourage student learning. Or teachers, it is felt and believed, are indifferent to student achievement and thus need to be prodded with threats of one kind or another.

A more positive approach might well be to identify and remediate sources of weaknesses in school support for student achievement including

1. assessing the quality of school facilities/materials for educating students. Dilapidated school buildings; outdated tattered textbooks; poverty in any community with crime ridden, dangerous areas; and inadequate tools to get the job of teaching done well are certainly in evidence in too many areas.
2. assessing the quality of parental accountability in providing for the needs of their offspring and for helping offspring in homework situations.
3. assessing the community to notice what is done for the recreational needs of students.
4. assessing an area/region to ascertain what is being done to accommodate heath needs of students.
5. assessing to notice student/teacher ratios in the classroom, shortcomings in salaries for teachers, and excessive demands upon teachers for high student test results.

Test results from students has almost become an obsession with governors and legislators from the different states in the union. How much emphasis should then be placed upon one variable in educating students, namely to do well on state mandated tests as well as the

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests?

Emphasizing Test Taking Skills

A school can stress that too much time be taken to assist students to do well in taking tests. Perhaps, weeks are given in a school year to develop test taking prowess on the part of students. Questions which may be raised in taking an excessive amount of school time to develop these skills within students are the following:

1. How valuable is it to have students learn what is on a test? Tests are written by human beings and no one can be sure that what is in multiple choice form test items is that valuable to learn to warrant, for example, a high rate of secondary student failure to obtain a diploma.
2. How valid and reliable are these test items on state mandated tests? Quality pilot studies need to be made on all state mandated tests before they are used in testing student achievement, especially with high stakes testing.
3. How carefully are state mandated tests aligned with their objectives/standards provided for and to teachers in teaching students? Tests become unfair if this alignment is not in the offing.
4. How valuable are test taking skills for students presently and at the future work place? Tests basically are not used to measure worker efficiency at the work place, rather the quality of actual work performed is assessed.
5. How much of critical and creative thinking as well as problem solving is emphasized in test items?

Perhaps, more time needs to be spent in other ways in the school curriculum than in developing test taking skills and prowess.

What Has to Give in the School Curriculum?

If a considerable amount of time is spent in test taking preparation of students, then time is taken form other activities and experiences in the school curriculum. What is tested may then appear in the school curriculum. What does not appear on tests is then not stressed in teaching and learning situations. Usually, the 3 rs receive much emphasis in and on tests. Thus reading, writing, and arithmetic might well receive <u>much</u> attention in the curriculum. This situation might well minimize the teaching of science and social studies as basics in the curriculum. Time for music, art, and physical education may then be completely eliminated of greatly minimized. Balance in the curriculum has truly become a causality. How might this dilemma be resolved?

1. add science, social studies, art, physical education, and music subject matter and skills to be covered in the state mandated tests.

2. use alternative mandated assessments for some curriculum areas, such as portfolios for art, music, and physical education.

3. deemphasize studying for state mandated tests. The state here may mandate that a selected amount of time be given to each curriculum area during the school day, such as music and art each be taught thirty minutes per school day. Multiple Intelligences Theory (Gardner, 1993)) emphasizes that students possess diverse intelligences and each should be stressed adequately in the school curriculum. These intelligences are verbal/linguistic, visual/space, logical/mathematical, musical/rhythmic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, bodily/kinesthetic, and scientific. Those possessing verbal/linguistic intelligence are favored in taking state mandated tests since reading of abstract words is emphasized thoroughly in multiple choice testing.

Educational Psychologists tend not to emphasize drill and memorization as being important, such as in student preparing for test taking, but rather that higher levels of cognition be stressed in ongoing lessons/units of study such as analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating of subject matter learned.

Costs of Materials for Test Taking Drills

Commercial companies certainly have noticed the need for materials of instruction to be used in preparing students for taking state mandated tests. The materials vary in type and access. Profit making would be the major motive of commercial companies in producing these materials for test preparation skills. These include the following:

1. New Bedford, Massachusetts schools is offering 12 sections of a course devoted to reviewing for the state test. Contracts were sent home to parents asking them to help prepare students for the test. $30,000 was spent to provide access for sophomores to Test U. Test U is an internet program that offers individual students chances to prepare for the tests in order to graduate. Students too may log on to taking simulated questions and answers pertaining to the state mandated test.

2. Commercial companies including Kaplan and the Princeton Review, veteran developers of test preparation courses such as the ACT and the SAT, are selling everything from professional development seminars to diagnostic tests tied to state mandated tests. Newer companies have created online tools that can give students test preparation in school and in the home. Selected publishers are selling textbooks and software designed to help teachers and families prepare students for state tests (Education Week, March 14, 2001, 1 and 28).

Advantages given for the many new available approaches in helping students prepare for high stakes, state mandated tests are the

following:

1. schools are under considerable pressure to have their students pass state mandated tests, especially with exit tests which need to be passed for high school graduation. The future is bleak indeed if a student does not possess a high school diploma.

2. a student generally may take the test over again if he/she failed in the first attempt. The psychological pressures are great here when another attempt is made to pass the test. However, passing it the second or third time is better that in failing to receive a high school diploma.

3. every available resource needs to be in the offing to assist teachers, parents, and students, to help the latter in passing the exit exam successfully. Failure is an awful thing to face in such an important occurrence.

There are a plethora of disadvantages in spending moneys and time to prepare students for high stakes testing, be it for passing from one grade level to the next or for exiting the high school successfully. These include the following:

1. items on the test may lack validity in that students have not had opportunities to study the materials, in depth and contextually, as covered on the state mandated test.

2. test taking prowess and skills may have little use in the future for most students in that evaluation of proficiency at the workplace will not involve being able to pass a test. Rather, the worker will be assessed in terms of how well he/she is doing in the world of work.

3. the correlation may be low in terms of how well the student did on a state mandated test and later success at the work place.

4. drill and practice for test taking takes up a considerable amount of time to emphasize. The student should spend time, instead, on metacognition, critical and creative thinking, as well as engage in problem solving. Life itself consists of being proficient in thinking within the framework of problem solving, not in passing tests.

5. learning should be ongoing and in context, not in studying isolated bits of information to pass tests. Multiple choice test items, too, are isolated from each other so that no clue is given as to what a correct answer is from having completed a previous multiple choice test item.

6. items on a test may not appear to be relevant for selected students since purposes vary from one learner to the next as to what is important to learn. If a test focuses on the academics only, not all will enter the world of becoming academicians.

7. numerous state mandated tests have not been pilot tested adequately. Thus, kinks and weaknesses are inherent in these tests. Reliability is lowered as weaknesses in multiple choice test items are in evidence. Tests need to have high reliability be it test/retest, alternative

forms, or split half.

8. mass numbers of state mandated tests to be scored require machine scoring. The technology used to score tests is made by human beings and can be subject to error. Erroneous test results can be devastating to students. Computer glitches are definitely possible.

9. scholars in teacher education have definite critics of state mandated tests in that they can be highly discriminative of different classes of students in society. Among others, a professor of education at the University of Texas finds this to be the case. Miller (2001) wrote the following:

As a professor of education at the University of Texas, Mr. Valencia finds the state's tests downright pernicious. In his view, a system widely praised for improving schools and bolstering the achievement of minority students is, in fact, misguided and discriminatory. "It's the wrong way to reach equality," he says.

Texas is one of at least 27 states that use the results of standardized tests to make so called high stakes decisions; to hold students back; to punish teachers, principals, and schools that perform poorly...

Scholars agree with educators and policy makers that tests can be useful for tracking children's progress and identifying weaknesses in teaching. But Mr. Valencia and other education researchers have begun describing testing's darker side, Standardized tests are too limited, to imprecise, and too easily misunderstood to form the basis of crucial decisions about students. And, they say, the high stakes consequences interfere with good teaching and discriminate against minority students who need help the most.

10. state mandated tests are too limited in scope for educational decision making; instead multiple assessment devices need to be used to evaluate student achievement, not the results from one test only.

Possible Solutions to the Assessment Problem

Continuous study and improvements need to be made pertaining to the problem of assessing learner achievement. States should not be in a hurry to develop quality tests. Too frequently, a state receives praise for implementing state mandated testing and teacher accountability laws without readers/listeners evaluating the quality of these measurement instruments or noticing what educators are saying about these policies (Ediger, 2000, Chapter Nine). The author proposes the following as possible solutions to the problems:

1. states need to make certain they have a good product for assessment purposes. They need to be held accountable for tests adopted to measure student achievement.

2. states need to be certain that school districts adhere to the

state standards or objectives of instruction in teaching and learning situations. Otherwise, the state developed and mandated test has little validity. It is unfair to students to test them on what they have not had opportunities to learn. If a state uses standardized tests to measure student achievement, the teacher is out of luck here in that no objectives exist for these kinds of tests (Ediger, 2000, Chapter Eleven).

3. states have an obligation to make pilot studies of their own developed and written tests. Otherwise, the test may lack reliability and not measure student achievement consistently. Large standard errors of measurement from student test results in pilot studies need to be eliminated. Clearly sated test items need to be in the offing.

4. chances for computer glitches in test scoring need to be evaluated as continuously as possible. Computers are not gods, but do have chances for making errors in scoring student tests.

5. test results should be used to diagnose and remediate problems in student learning. If items on a test have been missed by a student, these omissions in learning may then become objectives of instruction.

6. very careful consideration needs to be given to withholding diplomas from students for high school graduation or for not promoting a student from one grade level to the next. Test results are not that accurate to make the failing of students as their key ingredient.

7. report cards issued when comparing student achievement state by state makes for inaccuracies if state developed tests are used in making these comparisons. The difficulty level of these tests will vary from one state to the next. Thus, a state may test students on relatively easy multiple choice test items as compared to the next state. Also, a state may align their tests more closely with their objectives of instruction as compared to other states. There are endless number of variables to consider when making these comparisons.

8. when states test their students frequently such as yearly tests on each grade level, much time is then given to test preparation and administration. This might well rob students of valuable instructional time. The testing syndrome need to be watched carefully when excessive time is given to the assessment process, especially on/by the state level.

9. test results from students should be used to improve instruction. Thus, the teacher should receive feedback on incorrect responses made by students. What students missed on the state mandated tests should provide for possible objectives of instruction.

10. states should work in the direction of improving their state standards (objectives of instruction) as well as their tests to ascertain leaner achievement. The standards should not be excessively high to for ordain student failure nor be too easy to minimize motivation for learning (Ediger, 1996, Chapter Six).

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